

# **CONNECTing communities to rapid HIV self-testing kits through vending machines: An Australian roll-out**

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## **Background/Purpose:**

HIV self-testing (HIVST) options have emerged as a feasible and acceptable mode of increasing HIV testing rates, particularly among populations most at-risk, such as men who have sex with men from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Research consistently demonstrates the importance of HIVST initiatives needing to address known barriers to access, including cost and convenience. In recent years, vending machines stocking HIVST kits have indicated promising findings to supporting uptake in testing among priority populations.

## **Approach:**

In March 2022, Thorne Harbour Health implemented the CONNECT Project in South Australia to pilot and evaluate the use of vending machines to dispense free HIVST kits across various community venues (e.g., tertiary education, sex on premises venues). This project aimed to extend access to rapid testing and strengthen pathways to treatment and support among infrequent- and non-testers from CALD backgrounds, in particular men who have sex with men, migrants, and international students.

## **Outcomes/Impact:**

Since March 2022, 3,200 people have registered to use CONNECT and more than 4,300 HIVST kits have been dispensed. Data collected regarding vending machine usage, webpage visitation, and the effectiveness of specific campaign materials, has demonstrated the effectiveness of this pilot in achieving its aims. For example, descriptive analyses demonstrate that 52% of users are overseas-born, and 64% have never previously tested for HIV. Results drawn from a post-survey of participants following their HIVST dispense (n = 381 users) demonstrate that 96% of users are moderately to extremely likely to recommend the usage of HIVST kits, indicating the model's high acceptability.

## **Innovation and Significance:**

CONNECT will roll-out across all Australian jurisdictions from 2025. Given the evidence of community acceptance of this model of delivering rapid testing technology, implications for social marketing, community co-design, and resource translation across multiple languages are discussed within the context of future HIVST initiatives.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

Thorne Harbour Health's CONNECT project is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.